

# Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

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## Funeral Song, Op. 5

### Igor Stravinsky

In the 1960 book *Memories and Commentaries*, one of a series of volumes produced jointly by Igor Stravinsky and his amanuensis, Robert Craft, the composer said:

The *Chant Funèbre* for wind instruments that I composed in Rimsky's memory was performed in a concert conducted by Blumenfeld in St. Petersburg shortly after Rimsky's death. I remember the piece as the best of my works before *The Firebird*, and the most advanced in chromatic harmony. The orchestral parts must have been preserved in one of the St. Petersburg orchestra libraries; I wish someone in Leningrad would look for the parts, for I would be curious myself to see what I was composing just before *The Firebird*.

Those parts were finally recovered more than five decades later, thanks to efforts of Natalia Braginskaya, dean of the musicology department at the St. Petersburg Rimsky-Korsakov State Conservatory. Many scholars assumed the parts had been destroyed during the Russian Revolution or some ensuing upheaval. Braginskaya, however, held out hope. She enlisted the help of Conservatory archivists to search in all the logical places, but came up with nothing. In the spring of 2015, the Conservatory's library had to be emptied for a building renovation. A pile of manuscripts emerged, long concealed by stacks of other materials, and one of the librarians, Irina Sidorenko, spied the missing orchestral parts Braginskaya had described. In September 2015 Braginskaya delivered a

paper about the discovery at a musicological conference. She set about tidying up the performing parts and reconstructing an orchestral score, which has just been released by the Boosey & Hawkes publishing firm. Even before the edition appeared, the work received its second-ever performance, on December 2, 2016, in St. Petersburg, with Valery Gergiev leading the Mariinsky Orchestra.

It is curious that Stravinsky referred to his piece as a "*Chant Funèbre* for wind instruments." That implied that it was orchestrated for winds alone, which it decidedly was not; his comment must have reflected a slip of memory or of the tongue. In any case, it certainly was a *Chant Funèbre* — a "Funeral Song" or, in Russian, "Pogrebal'naya Pesnya" — in honor of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, premiered at a concert dedicated to that composer's memory.

Although Stravinsky was in no way a prodigy, he showed aptitude for music while a teenager. That not being judged a practical

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## IN SHORT

**Born:** June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, now Lomonosov, Russia

**Died:** April 6, 1971, in New York City

**Work composed:** 1908

**World premiere:** January 30, 1909, in the Great Hall of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, with Felix Blumenthal conducting Count Sheremetev's orchestra

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** these performances, which mark the New York Premiere

**Estimated duration:** ca. 12 minutes

career aspiration, he went to law school instead. One of his friends there was the youngest of Rimsky-Korsakov's sons. When Stravinsky's father died, in December 1902, Rimsky-Korsakov became his mentor, both personal and musical. By the time Rimsky-Korsakov died in 1908, Stravinsky had produced several ambitious works under the master's watchful eye, including his Piano Sonata in F-sharp minor and Symphony in E-flat.

Stravinsky was devastated by the loss of his teacher, but he had been well prepared for his future course. His career unfolded rapidly, and in the next four years he produced the masterpieces that remain his most popular more than a century later: *The Firebird* (1909–10), *Petrushka* (1911), and *The Rite of Spring* (1911–12). Their musical style stands some distance beyond the *Funeral Song*, accomplished and fascinating composition that it is. Stravinsky had mentioned the piece in his *An Autobiography* (1936), where he wrote:

I can no longer remember the music, but I can remember the idea at the root of its conception, which was that all the solo instruments of the orchestra filed past the tomb of the master in succession, each laying down its own melody as its wreath against a deep background of tremolo murmurings simulating the vibrations of bass voices singing in chorus. The impression made on the public, as well as on myself, was marked, but how far it was due to the atmosphere of mourning and how far to the merits of the composition itself I am no longer able to judge.

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, piano, two harps, and strings.

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## Angels and Muses

In the Stravinsky / Craft book *Memories and Commentaries*, Stravinsky acknowledged that the common perception of Rimsky-Korsakov as “someone not very easy with his sympathy and not abundantly generous or kind” was not entirely on target. He wrote:

My Rimsky was deeply sympathetic, however, deeply and unshowingly generous, and unkind only to admirers of Tchaikovsky. ... Rimsky was a strict man and a strict, though at the same time very patient, teacher .... His knowledge was precise, and he was able to impart whatever he knew with great clarity. ... He was for me, when I first came to him, *sans reproche* musically, but before very long I began to wish for someone even less “reproachable” and for music that would satisfy the ideals of my growing mind as Rimsky's was failing to do. The revival of polyphony and the renewal of form that had begun in Vienna in the very year of Rimsky's death were developments entirely unknown to the Rimsky school. I am grateful to Rimsky for many things, and I do not wish to blame him for what he did not know; nevertheless, the most important tools of my art I had to discover for myself.

From left, Stravinsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, his daughter Nadezhda Rimskaya-Korsakova, her fiancé Maximilian Steinberg, and Yekaterina Gavrilovna Stravinskaya née Nosenko, Stravinsky's first wife, in 1908

